

Children's Health Insurance Plan starts campaign to fill 2,000 slots

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau - 01/24/2006

HELENA - Come next month, the state will start a media campaign to publicize the Children's Health Insurance Program, which has 2,000 unfilled slots for kids from lower-income families.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer and his wife, Nancy, will appear in at least one of the public service announcements encouraging people to sign up their kids for the plan's free health insurance.

The media campaign, urged months ago by advocates of the program, will include TV and radio spots and newspaper advertising. It is scheduled to begin in mid-February.

"It's better late than never," Rep. Mary Caferro, D-Helena, said Monday. "We're so grateful they're doing outreach. The sooner it gets started, the more children will have access to health care."

Caferro, who works for the low-income group Working for Equality and Economic Liberation, has been a longtime advocate of expanding the ranks of CHIP.

CHIP offers government-funded health insurance for kids in families with income up to 150 percent of the federal poverty level and who don't qualify for other public programs.

The annual income cut-off for a family of four is \$29,025.

The 2005 Legislature increased CHIP funding to place another 3,000 children on the program, which at the time provided insurance for nearly 11,000 kids.

But when the new funding kicked in last summer, the state had not aggressively advertised the fact that it would have new slots.

Since last July, only 1,000 kids have been added to the program, putting current enrollment at about 11,900 children.

The Schweitzer administration had been concerned whether newly imposed cigarette taxes would provide the expected revenue to pay for the CHIP increase. Tobacco tax revenue, however, is meeting projections.

Jackie Forba, chief of the Montana's Health Care Resources Bureau, said the state is using CHIP funds for the media campaign, and wants to preserve as much money as possible for health insurance.

"We're being very cautious on how much we're spending, but we want to get the word out," she said.

In addition to advertising on TV, radio and newspapers, the state also is working with health-care providers to have CHIP application forms available, Forba said. The theme of the campaign will be "Health insurance for kids; peace of mind for parents."

Caferro said it's important for the state to target people who are most in need of the insurance provided by CHIP, such as rural Montanans and Native Americans.

A state-commissioned survey has shown that nearly 40 percent of Native American children in Montana are without health insurance and that 20 percent of rural kids don't have insurance.

Caferro said she hopes the state will work with groups that have contact with working Montanans who might need health insurance, such as unions, employment offices and public health clinics.

"There should be CHIP applications in every emergency room in the state and every O-B ward," Caferro said.

Forba said the state is still working out the final details of the advertising campaign.